

Does Dinka have tripartite number marking?

Tripartite number marking, a system introduced by Dimmendaal (2000) and found in numerous Nilo-Saharan languages, involves three number-marking patterns: nouns marked in the plural, nouns marked in the singular, and nouns marked in both the plural and the singular ('replacive'). In several West Nilotic languages, these three patterns are marked by suffixes. The Dinka language (West Nilotic, South Sudan), however, is known for its non-concatenative morphology; most of the language's morphology is expressed via binary voice quality, ternary vowel length, and tone contrasts. This stem-internal morphology originates from the absorption of suffixes into the stem (Andersen 1990). The resulting effect is that Dinka noun number is expressed by shifts in vowel quality and length, voice quality, and tone; examples from the Luanyjang dialect of Dinka can be seen in the Table below. One sees that the exponents of number are varied from item to item.

Gloss	Singular	Plural	Change
'house'	bàaaɟ	bɛ̃ɛɛɟ	Vowel quality, voice quality, tone
'fish'	rɛ̃ɛc	rɛc	Vowel quality, voice quality, tone, vowel length
'charcoal'	còool	còool	Vowel length, tone
'cattle bell'	lòot̩	lòot̩	Tone
'bran'	ɲèej	ɲèej	Vowel quality

Previous studies (Storch 2005, Ladd et al. 2009, Andersen 2014) have suggested that though there may be some sub-patterns, Dinka noun number marking is ultimately not systematic, let alone synchronically tripartite; Andersen (2014) has explicitly suggested that the tripartite system is no longer productive in Dinka. However, recent work (Ladd & Blum, to appear) suggests that Dinka noun number morphology *is* systematic. The subsequent question is whether Dinka noun number morphology is also synchronically tripartite?

This presentation will show that synchronically, Dinka does not have tripartite noun number marking. This is true despite the fact that it is systematic, and in some areas of the nominal morphology, even predictable. This is shown via evidence from nominal inflections *other* than singular-plural marking: the two construct states—the forms that nouns take when modified—and case marking. Though there are clearly vestigial traces of what once was a tripartite system, there is no evidence of a productive class of replacive nouns. Instead, inflected nouns clearly behave differently depending on whether a given form is singular or plural (even though this is not true of the base forms). This is the first *cross-dialect* study of the nominal morphology of Dinka that includes inflections other than the base forms. Because dialects of Dinka can differ significantly in their morphosyntax, generalizations that hold within a single dialect do not necessarily hold cross-dialectally. However, generalizations made in this presentation hold across dialects, suggesting that they will hold across the language as a whole. Given that related languages with concatenative morphology can be synchronically tripartite, the Dinka data inform the study of the development of West Nilotic languages, particularly whether the loss of productive tripartite number can be correlated with the loss of concatenative morphology more broadly across West Nilotic or even Nilo-Saharan. On an even broader scale, this study informs work on noun systems with especially complex morphology.

References

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